



Solar lanterns light up Tilonia women's lives

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The Times of India News Service

TILONIA (Rajasthan): At first glance, Kamla (26) appears to be the archetypical village belle. She hides shyly behind a veil, her slender frame weighed down by chunky silver jewellery and her face almost hidden by her huge nose ring. She speaks diffidently and has to be coaxed to make conversation, particularly with strangers.

But put her behind a table full of wires, circuits, charge controllers and panels and she is a transformed person as she deftly assembles together a solar lantern singlehandedly.

Kamla is Rajasthan's first woman ``barefoot solar engineer'', trained at Tilonia village's special community development project - the Barefoot College campus or the Social Work Research Centre (SWRC).

Having undergone a six-month training course, Kamla is adept at both manufacturing and repairing solar lamps. She is presently in charge of a sub-workshop at Binjenwara village near Tilonia where she is responsible for the repair and maintenance of 50 solar lanterns which are used as a source of power in the night schools operating in the surrounding villages.

Kamla tells you how she studied at night schools and the solar lanterns used there caught her fascination. So when she learnt of the training course at Tilonia, she promptly signed up. "My husband and mother-in-law objected to my going out of the house - they wanted me to work in the fields like other women. But my father-in-law supported me and the others finally relented," she recalls.

"We wanted to shatter this myth that women can only work in fields or at home. We wanted to demystify technology and make it simpler and accessible to even the illiterate. Kamla was ready for this and we grabbed the opportunity," says Charu, a volunteer with the Tilonia project, adding that the Solar Energy Unit's main emphasis is on training rural youth, particularly women. The idea is to give these women an opportunity to live a life of dignity and boost their self-esteem.

Kamla is also a trend-setter of sorts. A number of other illiterate, village women have defied age-old traditions, stepped out of their cloistered homes and trained as "barefoot solar engineers". Neeelam Kanwar, who is presently undergoing a six-month course at Tilonia, says she used to live in purdah and "felt utterly suffocated". "My husband persuaded me to become independent," she adds, stating that earlier when solar lanterns in their village had to be repaired, they had to be sent to Tilonia but now "we will be able to repair them in the village itself".

The training programme is part of a much larger ongoing solar electrification project, making the Barefoot College Campus probably the only one of its kind which is totally solar electrified. The 16 kw of solar energy enables the campus to electrify its buildings, run televisions, VCRs, a telephone exchange with 40 rural connections and operate its 18 computers.

Taking a cue from this, the UNDP, along with the ministry of non-conventional energy sources and SWRC, recently decided to collaborate in the development of similar solar electrification systems in remote areas of Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Assam and Sikkim.